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ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program concerned with what young children need to know about death and how parents can help them deal with it is designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials. The guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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DEALING WITH DEATH: THE TIME IS NOW



And We Were Sad, Remember?

Student Guide



footsteps

A world to be born under your footsteps...

St.-John Perse

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FROM THE EDITORS

Death is one of the few things in life we can count on. Sooner or later we will die. It's just a matter of time.

But even though death cannot be escaped, our society tries to deny — even defy — this final phase of living. Until recently it has been almost un-American to talk about death — especially with children.

In this booklet you will learn how our attempts to conceal death from children are not only ineffective, but harmful to children. You will learn why children need to know about death, how parents can introduce this subject at an early age, and how parents can help children deal with death when it happens.

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THE BIG IDEAS



Because it is part of life, parents need to help children understand and accept death.



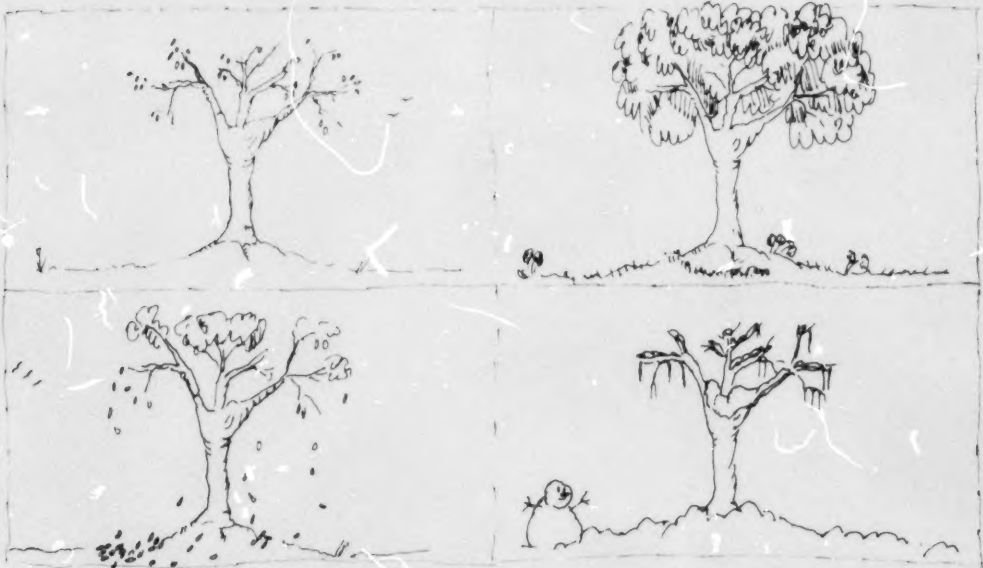
Children can begin to understand and talk about death at an early age.



Shielding children from death tends to confuse them and deprive them of their right to mourn.



Introducing children to the idea of death early in life, and answering their questions honestly, prepares children to deal with death when it happens.



To everything there is a season
and a time to every purpose —
A time to be born, a time to die;
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

— Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,4.

DEATH: A Part of Life

Death is a fact of life.

Death is as natural a human experience as birth. The fact that we are alive today means that one day we will die. This is part of the unending cycle of life.

Yes, death is sure to come. But despite its inevitability, death has become a taboo subject in our culture. So many people regard it as an issue to be avoided — especially with young children. We don't even like to use the word "dead." Instead, we say: he "passed on" or "departed" or "expired" or "went away."

How did this reluctance come about?

AN UNSPOKEN WORD

Until the early part of this century, death was a natural part of family life in this country. Families were larger, and people often died at younger ages than they do today. Death, like birth, usually happened in the home, in the presence of the whole family. Few children grew up without seeing death take place.

Today, however, we have found ways to cure many diseases and to lengthen life. When death does take place, it is usually in the hospital, far away from the eyes of children. The body is then taken to a funeral parlor to be prepared for burial:

The process of death has become isolated from the life of the family.

And as we have come to see less of death, so have we begun to talk less about it. Maybe we think that by avoiding the subject, death will go away.

It won't, of course.

Many parents are particularly hesitant to discuss death with young children. Perhaps they think that children are not capable of understanding and talking about death. Or, they may want to shield their children from this painful experience for as long as possible. They may think they can avoid death by not mentioning the subject, or ignoring children's questions, or giving children roundabout answers.

They can't, of course.

A REALITY THAT CAN'T BE HIDDEN

Children are aware of death from an early age:

The reality of death cannot be hidden, for death is always around us.

One day grandpa may not return from the hospital. Or a favorite pet may be hit by a car. A funeral procession may pass by. Or a well-known public figure may be assassinated. And, for those children who watch the television news, people are killed every day in "living" color.

Young children are quite capable of understanding and talking about death. Not only are they able, but:

Children are willing and even eager to talk about death.

They are curious about what happens around them. They know when something is wrong. They notice whispered phone calls, hushed conversations, tears, and strained faces. They notice — and they want to understand what it all means.

A Mixed Message

American novelist James Agee won a Pulitzer Prize for his portrayal of a young boy's first encounter with death in *A Death in the Family*. Here is how the boy, Rufus, reacted when his mother first told him and his sister of their father's death in an automobile accident:

... "Neither of you will quite understand for a while," she said. "It's — very hard to understand. But you will," she said (I do, he said to himself; he's dead. That's what). . . "When you want to know more — about it" (and her eyes became still more vibrant) "just, just ask me and I'll tell you because you ought to know." *How did he get hurt*, Rufus wanted to ask, but he knew by her eyes that she did not mean at all what she said, not now anyway, not this minute, he must not ask; and now he did not want to ask because he too was afraid. . .

HOW MUCH DID RUFUS' MOTHER THINK HE WAS ABLE TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT DEATH?

HOW DID HIS MOTHER'S WORDS AND BEHAVIOR AFFECT RUFUS?

A NEED AND A RIGHT

Parents who ignore children's questions about death, or give them false or incomplete information, are not helping children in their search for meaning. Such tactics only confuse children. They leave children all alone to find their own explanations for what has happened:

Three-year-old Cindy's uncle has died. She sees her mother crying and the rest of the family talking in whispers. She asks her mother what's wrong. "Nothing," says her mother. Cindy thinks she must have done something wrong. She begins to feel guilty, and goes to her room to try to figure out what she did to upset everyone.



By trying to protect their children, parents can instead make death a very frightening subject:

Five-year-old Randy's grandmother has died. Because Randy was so close to his grandmother, Randy's parents tell him that grandma has just gone to sleep and won't ever wake up again. Starting that night, Randy dawdles about going to bed. He lies terrified in his bed each night, trying very hard not to fall asleep. He is worried that he, too, might never wake up again.

Children have always been scared by secrecy and mystery.

Children who are shielded from death are deprived of their right to mourn. Like love, hate, and joy, sorrow is a natural and important human emotion.

Like other emotions, sorrow needs to be expressed. This is true for children as well as for adults. Mourning the death of a relative or friend or pet is an expression of love. It provides children with a chance to grow, to overcome pain, and to come to terms with their loss.

These are important experiences that no parent would want to deny children.

DEATH: Bringing It Out in the Open

Death is not an easy thing to accept. Nothing parents can say or do will ever make death painless for children. By offering truth and support, though, parents can make it easier for children to deal with death.

Nor is it possible to say exactly what parents should tell children about death. This will depend on many things, including their own feelings about death, their religious beliefs, and the developmental level of their children. Here, though, are a few general guidelines that can be useful in talking to children about death:

INTRODUCE CHILDREN TO THE IDEA OF DEATH EARLY IN LIFE.

It is better to start discussing death with children when they are young than to wait until they are actually confronted with death. In this way, children can begin to deal with the facts of death without the complication of strong emotions, such as grief. Then, when a death actually occurs, they will be better prepared to cope with it.

Parents can use many ordinary events to introduce children to the concept of death. The death of a plant can help to get across the idea of the rhythm of life and the notion that — unlike a broken toy — some things cannot be fixed or changed. The death of a pet can provide a good opportunity for children to experience feelings of grief. When this happens, parents should not rush out and buy children a new pet. By waiting a while, they let children learn and grow from one of their first encounters with the sorrow of losing something dear to them.

BE HONEST AND STRAIGHTFORWARD IN YOUR EXPLANATIONS OF DEATH.

As we've already learned, telling half-truths or untruths about death is likely to make children confused and anxious. Children need simple, direct and honest information about death.

This does not mean that parents should overwhelm children with details about death. Giving a child too much information can be as confusing as too little. If a 3-year-old child asks what "dead" means, parents need not give a long scientific explanation. A simple, factual reply will do: "Death is when a person's body stops breathing and can never move again." Parents help most when they talk to children honestly, but at their level.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT DEATH

When children experience the death of someone they love, they react in many different ways, just like adults. They may deny what has happened, or protest its unfairness. They may be angry at the dead person for leaving them, or blame themselves for doing something that made the person die. They may cry, despair, or withdraw. They may want to stage an elaborate funeral for a dead pet, or play "death" or "funeral" with their friends. They may even have no response at all.

All these reactions are normal ways of coping with pain and should be respected. Parents should encourage children to express their emotions — through talking, playing, or whatever activity serves the individual child's needs. Parents also help children work through their feelings of grief when they let children know that they, too, are sad and troubled: "I'm unhappy that your cousin Stevie died, too. I loved him, and I miss him very much."

When a Parent Dies . . .

Parents deal best with this difficult situation when they are open with their own feelings, find outlets for their emotions, and seek the comfort and help of friends. It is important that they let children participate in the family's observance of death. They should not be surprised if their children do not have the same strong feelings they have. For often young children are not able to understand the finality of death. If, however, a child seems overwhelmed by the loss, the parent may want to seek professional advice.

One out of 20 children faces the death of a parent during childhood. The loss of a parent is especially hard on children. Their world will never be as secure again. They may react with guilt (that they did something to cause the death) or fear (that the other parent will leave them, too).

Helping a child deal with the death of a parent is very hard for the remaining parent, too. He or she may be overwhelmed by painful feelings. The parent has to work through these feelings, and at the same time give the child emotional support and reassurance that life goes on.

REMEMBER THAT YOUNG CHILDREN'S INITIAL UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH IS NOT COMPLETE

Very young children are not able to understand the finality of death. They don't realize that death means a complete and permanent end to life. Instead, they tend to view death as merely a separation, or a state of being less alive:

After President Kennedy had been killed and buried, his 3-year-old son John came back to the White House for a visit. When he saw his father's secretary, he looked up at her and asked: "When is my daddy coming back?"

Even though young children's understanding of death is incomplete, parents should still talk to them about death. Children will take in what information they can, and gradually their understanding of death will deepen.

Death is hard, but fortunately, grief does not last forever. Children, like adults, gradually adapt and learn to live without those they once loved. Children, too, can learn to live with death.

A POET'S INSPIRATION

We may be unwilling to talk about death in everyday life. But throughout the centuries men and women have explored death's meaning in great works of art. Look, for example, at how death has inspired poets. They have seen death as...

...a solemn end that awaits us all:

Bear in mind
That death is a drum
Beating for ever
Till the last worms come
To answer its call...

— Langston Hughes
Drum

...a cold but genteel driver coming to take a lady out for a drive:

Because I could not stop for death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality...

— Emily Dickinson
The Chariot

...a comfort to look forward to:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

— Robert Frost
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

...one more phase in the never-ending cycle of life:

when god lets my body be
from each brave eye shall sprout a tree
fruit that dangles therefrom
the purpled world will dance upon...

— e. e. cummings
when god lets my body be

...a fate that should be resisted:

Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

— Dylan Thomas
Do not go gentle into that good night

WHICH ONE OF THESE POEMS FITS MOST CLOSELY YOUR OWN ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH?

CAN YOU RECALL ANY OTHER POEMS OR WORKS OF ART ABOUT DEATH? WHAT VIEW OF DEATH DO THEY EXPRESS?

FILM REVIEW SECTION

And We Were Sad, Remember?

Amos Sandburg's mother has died. He and his wife Jeannie disagree about how much their two children, Allison and Christopher, should be involved in the final arrangements and funeral.

Amos and his sister think the children are too young to learn about death and go to the funeral. Jeannie, on the other hand, feels that Allison and Christopher should be allowed to participate to the extent that they want. She is honest with them in talking about death, and thinks they should be allowed to attend the funeral.

As Amos works through his own feelings about his mother's death, he observes how Allison and Christopher are reacting. Gradually, he realizes that not only are they able to cope with their grandmother's death, but that they have been doing a better job of it than he.

**WHY WERE THE CHILDREN'S
WAYS OF COPING WITH THEIR
GRANDMOTHER'S DEATH MORE
EFFECTIVE THAN THOSE OF
AMOS?**



ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1 A TIME TO TELL

Ordinary events — like the death of a plant or pet — can help parents teach children that life has a rhythm that cannot be changed. When children learn about death through such experiences at an early age, they are better able to cope with human death later on.

Here's how one mother helped her 3-year-old daughter understand the death of her dog.

"Mommy, Fido won't get up."
"Fido is dead, Jennifer. He died. He won't ever get up again."
"Dead?"
"Yes, that's right. Dead."
"What's dead?"
"Dead means that Fido has stopped breathing, and his heart has stopped beating. See how he's not moving? He'll never be able to move again."
"How come?"
"Because sooner or later everything that lives has to die."
"Will I die?"
"Yes, but not for a very long time."
"Will you die?"
"Yes, I'll die, too, but I take good care of myself, so that shouldn't be for many years."
"Will Daddy die?"
"Yes, everybody dies, but we expect Daddy will be around for quite a while yet."
"Oh. (Pause) Now make Fido better."
"I'm sorry, honey, I can't make Fido better. This isn't like when your scooter broke and I fixed it. Or like when you had a stomach ache and Daddy gave you medicine to make you feel better. This is different. When you're dead you don't get better again."
"Why?"
"Because that's the way things are. Remember how we planted seeds in the garden last spring?"
"Yes."
"And remember how they grew and became beautiful flowers?"
"Yes."
"And then after a while all the flowers fell off and never came back. Remember?"
"Yes."
"Well, that's what this is like. Fido used to be a little puppy. Then he grew up to be a big dog and had lots of fun with us for a while. Then he got old, and now he's dead."
"I don't like dead."
"I don't either. Nobody does. It makes us sad when someone we love dies. Sometimes it makes us feel a little better to talk about how we feel. Sometimes we cry. That's all right too. Do you feel sad?"
"Yes."
"I'm sad, too, honey. Come here on my lap and we'll be sad together."

What did Jennifer want to know about death?

How did her mother respond to her questions?

Was Jennifer able to understand her mother's answers?

Was she upset by her mother's explanation of death?

What else does this story tell you about explaining death to children?

activity #2

WHEN QUESTIONS COME . . .

In their search for knowledge, kids sometimes ask very difficult questions. Answering them can be a problem if you haven't thought things out beforehand.

Discuss with your classmates some different ways a parent might respond to the following questions about death:



activity #3

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

In each of the situations below, parents miss an opportunity to help a child understand and cope with death. In each case:



explain what is wrong with the way the parent responded



describe how the child may have been affected by this response



suggest some better ways to handle the situation.

All summer Juanita has been helping her father tend their garden and harvest the vegetables. One morning she notices that the plants have all withered, and that there are no more vegetables. She asks her father what happened. He tells Juanita that they just need to get some new plants.

Bernard's parents have just found out that his grandmother, who lives with them, is dying of cancer. They decide to send his grandmother to a nursing home. They tell Bernard that she has gone on a long trip and won't be coming back.

Candy's pet goldfish dies one day while Candy is out with her father. Candy's mother quickly flushes the fish down the toilet, and rushes out to buy another fish. She hopes she can find one that looks just like the old one so that Candy will never know the difference.



GRAB BAG

to

1. Some people are afraid to talk about death. Find out if there is such a program in your school. If not, start one in action. Or, talk to the teacher about why the students are afraid of death, and what the results are.
2. Look through newspapers or magazines for stories about young children. Choose one that you like, and read it to your class. Talk about the story, then you're finished.

What were the children's feelings about death?

How would you feel if you were told about death?

What were the children's feelings about the death and their situation?

(It would be useful to have a class discussion about the story, and tell them what you plan to do.)

3. Find out if there are any organizations that help people who are dying — for example, a religious organization, a medical organization, Parents Without Partners, or the American Cancer Society. Visit the organization and talk to someone about the death of a child, and how the child is feeling death, and what the organization does to help them.
4. Watch the television news and see how the children's programs in the how they portray death and dying. How do you think the news might affect children's ideas about death?

to discuss

1. Share with your classmates your experiences with the death of a relative, friend, or pet:

Do you remember the death of a relative, friend, or pet?

How did you feel about the death?

How did you feel about the death?

What were your feelings about the death?

2. Do you ever feel that death is a mystery? Do you feel that death is a mystery?
3. How do you feel about death? Do you feel that death is a mystery? How would you help him or her?
4. Should people be allowed to die? Do you think it is a good idea? Do you think it is a bad idea?
5. Do you ever feel that death is a mystery? Do you feel that death is a mystery?

GRAB BAG

to research

1. How children's understanding of death increases as they grow older.
2. The movement in this country to set up hospices — centers for people who are dying that allow them to be surrounded by their family:

How does dying in a hospice compare with dying in a hospital?
Would hospices help bring death back into the family?
Are they a good idea?

(Look for articles in periodicals, and write to the Washington Hospice Society, 1511 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., or to a hospice society in your area.)

3. How people who have found out they were dying have come to terms with death, and the stages of grieving they have gone through. (See *On Death and Dying* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and other books listed in the Book Section.)
4. What different religions teach about death. You might want to refer to the holy books of several different religions — for example, the *Holy Bible* (Christianity); *Koran* (Islam); *Talmud* (Judaism), *Bhagavad Gita* (Hinduism), and *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Buddhism).
5. Mourning and burial customs in other cultures. For example, read about the Irish wake, Jewish shivah, Egyptian mummification, Italian burials, Native American death customs, and African funeral celebrations. In each case find out:

what the culture's attitude toward death is
what purpose(s) the mourning period or funeral ceremony serves
how children are involved
how these customs compare with your own.

6. How death has been portrayed in art. Select an art form in which you are interested (for example, music, painting, dance, film, photography, literature, or poetry) and find out how death has been described in this medium.
7. How children expressed their confrontation with death in Nazi concentration camps. (See the book ... *I never saw another butterfly* ... and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*.)

BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that will give you more information on...

...children and death

Explaining Death to Children. Earl A. Grollman, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967. (paperback)

Helping Your Child to Understand Death. Anna M. Wolf. New York: Child Study Press, 1973.

Talking About Death. A Dialogue Between Parent and Child. Earl A. Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970. (paperback)

...how dying people have coped with death

Brian's Song. William Blinn. New York: Bantam, 1972. (paperback)

Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir. John Gunther. New York: Harper and Row, 1949. (paperback)

Death, The Final Stage of Growth. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975. (paperback)

On Death and Dying. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. New York: Macmillan, 1969. (paperback)

Sunshine. Norma Klein. New York: Avon, 1974. (paperback)

...how death has been portrayed in plays and novels

A Death in the Family. James Agee. New York: Avon, 1959. (paperback)

A Farewell to Arms. Ernest Hemingway. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929. (paperback)

The Good Earth. Pearl S. Buck. New York: Pocket Books, 1958. (paperback)

Red Badge of Courage. Stephen Crane. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960. (paperback)

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